



June 25, 2019

Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator,

On behalf of the 1.7 million members of the American Federation of Teachers, including 130,000 healthcare professionals, I write to express our views regarding the Lower Health Care Costs Act of 2019. We are glad that Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee Chairman Lamar Alexander and Ranking Member Patty Murray have once again found a way to move forward with commonsense bipartisan legislation. Indeed, it is a testament to their ability to work together that this bill includes numerous proposals from both Democratic and Republican senators. While there is much more Congress can do to ensure that quality, affordable healthcare is available—to all—the Lower Health Care Costs Act is an important first step. We hope that this and other important healthcare bills do not end up in Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell's legislative graveyard. My members, like the rest of the public, desperately need Congress to fight for their needs, not put them aside for political points.

The AFT believes it is crucial to protect patients and their families from surprise medical billing. Despite having health insurance, patients are unnecessarily exposed to surprise medical bills, due to a combination of narrow provider networks, inadequate information about the network status of providers and covered costs, and the lack of regulations restricting "balance billing." These surprise medical bills can run into the tens of thousands of dollars and leave patients with crippling debt. Patients burdened with medical debt are too often forced to empty savings and retirement accounts, work longer hours and take on multiple jobs, increase borrowing, and/or cut back spending on food, clothing and other basic household items. This practice must end. The AFT is pleased that the Lower Health Care Costs Act removes the patient from the payment equation. We are also glad that states are allowed to continue existing effective models of addressing surprise billing.

We are also encouraged by the proposals in the Lower Health Care Costs Act to reduce the prescription drug costs that our members face. While it is clear that allowing the federal government to negotiate drug prices and ensuring the safe importation of pharmaceuticals are needed to significantly reduce what patients pay for medicine, the bill's language to improve access to generics and reduce the ability of pharmacy benefit managers to overcharge for medicine is a positive step. Similarly, the language to

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

American Federation
of Teachers, AFL-CIO

AFT Teachers
AFT PSRP
AFT Higher Education
AFT Public Employees
AFT Nurses and Health
Professionals

555 New Jersey Ave. N.W.
Washington, DC 20001
202-879-4400
www.aft.org

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Lorretta Johnson
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Mary Cathryn Ricker
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

VICE PRESIDENTS

J. Philippe Abraham
Shelvy Y. Abrams
Barbara Bowen
Vicky Rae Byrd
Christine Campbell
Zeph Capo
Alex Caputo-Pearl
Donald Carlisto
Larry J. Carter, Jr.
Kathy A. Chavez
Melissa Cropper
Evelyn DeJesus
Aida Diaz Rivera
Jolene T. DiBrango
Marietta A. English
Eric Feaver
Francis J. Flynn
David Gray
Anthony M. Harmon
David Hecker
Jan Hochadel
Fedrick C. Ingram
Jerry T. Jordan
Ted Kirsch
Frederick E. Kowal
Louis Malfaro
Terrence Martin, Sr.
Joanne M. McCall
John McDonald
Daniel J. Montgomery
Michael Mulgrew
Candice Owley
Andrew Pallotta
Joshua Pechthalt
Paul Pecorale
David J. Quolke
Jesse Sharkey
Denise Specht
Wayne Spence
Tim Stoelb
Jessica J. Tang
Ann Twomey
Adam Urbanski



improve transparency can only help to bring down costs and reduce the stress of seeking medical care.

The AFT strongly supports other key elements of the bill that seek to address a number of concerning public health challenges, including the increased unwillingness to use vaccines, the needs of communities in underserved areas, and the existence and impact of implicit bias in maternal care. We recognize that a patient's health depends not only on access to high-quality healthcare facilities and professionals, but also on social determinants such as housing, education, employment, community environment, lack of transportation and environmental stress. These factors, when combined with a lack of access to high-quality care and discrimination, can lead to tragic outcomes, as we have seen with the disparity in maternal death rates. The education and training grants included in Title IV of the Lower Health Care Costs Act are important steps toward addressing the challenges described above.

Thank you for considering our views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Randi Weingarten". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Randi" and last name "Weingarten" clearly distinguishable.

Randi Weingarten
President

RW : emc opeiu#2 afl-cio